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ABSTRACT

Gangs have become a fixture in the Mexican American populations of southern California and other regions, spreading from low-income neighborhoods in the Southwest to working class and lower-middle class suburban areas. The development and institutionalization of gangs have involved many factors, including racial discrimination and economic barriers faced by Mexican American immigrants and their children; immigrant parents' loss of control over their children during the struggle to adapt to urban American culture; and the inability or unwillingness of other social institutions to meet these children's needs. The sense of displacement, isolation, and alienation that such Mexican American youth feel is associated with a condition of multiple marginality (with ecological, economic, sociocultural, and sociopsychological components). What began as wayward kids hanging around the street, almost detached from family influences, unfamiliar with and uncommitted to schools, and in fear of the law, gradually became rooted as a new subculture: the street gang. Gang subculture now dominates the streets, demanding adjustment and conformity from street socialized youth, but also providing a substitute caring, teaching, and sanctioning influence. Integral to this shift in the socialization process from the home to the streets are the effects of culture shock and conflict, leading to fragmented cultural adaptation and a "cholo" (mixed Mexican/Anglo) subculture. This digest discusses the development of a gang identity among adolescents; describes gang signs, symbols, and characteristic activities; and suggests that communities and schools adopt balanced intervention strategies. (SV)

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Learning From Gangs: The Mexican American Experience

by James Diego Vigil

GANGS have become a fixture in the Mexican American populations of southern California and other regions of the nation. Beginning in the 1940s as a small number of neighborhood-based youth groups given to periodic outbursts of destructive behavior, gangs have evolved into very deadly and violent street entities. Today, a still-small number, between 4 percent and 10 percent, of Mexican American youth belong to gangs. Aggression and group conflict have always been a part of the Mexican American gang experience (Klein, 1971). With the recent introduction of drugs and weapons, however, intergroup violence and homicides have spiraled out of control; and bystanders, unaffiliated with gangs, often become the victims. Chicano gangs were once confined to the many low-income *barrios* (neighborhoods) in the southwestern United States. Today, the influence of such urban street gangs (of all ethnic groups) is compounded by widespread media exposure. Gangs have appeared in working-class and lower-middle-class suburban areas, in many instances recruiting White youth as gang members (Huff, 1996).

Origins of Mexican American Gangs

Many factors have played a role in the development and institutionalization of gangs. Among them are historical experiences stemming from racial discrimination and economic barriers that have detrimentally affected Mexican American families and their children. Particularly noteworthy in the context of large-scale and continuing immigration since the 1920s are where the newcomers settled, what jobs they filled, and how these beginnings affected other aspects of their lives. Many immigrant parents lost control of their children during their initial struggle to adapt to urban American culture while still retaining some rural Mexican identity. Next, they too had to cope with economic hardships compounded by prejudice and discrimination. All too often, other institutions of social control (especially schools and police) were unable or unwilling to adequately address the needs of these children. Left to their own devices and the influence of older peers encountered in the streets, the youth formed gangs. Over the years, a gang subculture has been elaborated by successive generations of young people.

Multiple marginality. Multiple factors contribute to the sense of displacement, isolation, and alienation that such Mexican American youth feel. The concept of *multiple marginality* (with ecological, economic, sociocultural, and sociopsychological components) best describes the complex nature of the aimless adaptation that has produced street gangs, and the dynamic interactive actions and reactions that reverberate among all these forces (Vigil, 1988).

First, the early barrios were situated in ecologically marginal areas of the city, places such as gullies and other lowlands that developers considered undesirable. These enclaves were socially and physically separate from Anglo American neighborhoods—"the other side of the tracks"—sometimes literally. Visually distinct in their appearance and their amenities—dirt roads, limited public utilities or none, outhouses, older run-down homes, and so on—these barrios were stigmatized as the places where poor, unskilled, "dirty" Mexicans lived (Moore, 1978, 1991).

Early immigrants' lives were affected by economic marginality as well. Entry-level, low-paying jobs in agriculture, ranching, and light industry were typically their only opportunities for employment. Much later, when service industries emerged as sources of jobs, many immigrants became gardeners, car washers, janitors, dish washers, domestics, and the like. In spite of the obstacles, most of the Mexican immigrants fashioned productive lives for their families, and their Mexican American offspring often became even more successful, though faced with continuing racial and ethnic discrimination. A life of persistent and concentrated poverty, however, ensued for a substantial minority of barrio dwellers who could not escape the secondary or segmented labor market. These are jobs with no room for advancement, with very low wages, and with few or no benefits; in short, jobs that generally exploit and manipulate a marginal labor force (Moore & Vigil, 1993).

The repercussions of poverty and exploitation have had wide-ranging consequences in the social and cultural life of youth. The breakdowns in social control, as well as cultural and ethnic identity conflict, have had a major impact on the making of gangs and the shaping of gang members. What began as wayward kids hanging around the street, almost detached from family influences, unfamiliar with and uncommitted to schools, and in fear of the "law," gradually became rooted as a new subculture: the street gang. Moreover, because a gang subculture now dominates the streets, youngsters who become street socialized must adjust and conform to the culture that these "street elites" have fashioned. Where the parents, schools, and police have left off, the gang subculture has taken over and become the substitute caring, teaching, and sanctioning influence.

The Gang Subculture

Integral to this shift in the socialization process from the home to the streets are the effects of culture shock and conflict. These have led to a decidedly *cholo* (derived from early Spanish and Mexican usage, meaning racial or cultural marginals) street subculture. In part a result of a fragmented cultural adaptation with both Mexican and Anglo American traits and habits mixed together (the language that some call *Spanglish*), this cholo orientation becomes internalized in the streets. While most Mexican American youth find solace as assimilated *Chic-Anglos* or

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stable, fluently bilingual biculturals, the cholo culture reflects a poverty-ridden, unguided, and largely unfettered process of street socialization and identity (Vigil, 1997).

It is no coincidence that youth enter and participate in gangs during a period of status transition from childhood to adulthood. Known as the *psychological moratorium*, adolescence is a time of confusion and ambiguity when age and gender identity must be formed. Youth who are already street socialized are inclined to solidify a street identity. This is particularly so for boys, raised in the female-dominated households that often emerge from the familial stresses of poverty and social marginalization, who must now adjust and conform to the male-dominated streets. As in other cultures that face this gender dilemma, the street gang has formalized a gang initiation ritual to help newcomers take on a new "tough male" identity. In addition, the solidarity among gang members helps to reduce the anxiety involved in life on the streets.

With gang association comes mind-altering drugs, hair-trigger weapons, and a *locura* (quasi-controlled craziness) mindset to act out personal aggressions and rage. The gang subculture itself has values ("ought-tos") and norms ("blueprints for action") that guide and direct gang members. Protection of barrio territory or honor is what usually generates and ignites the gang conflict, including drive-by shootings and other violence, that pits barrio against barrio, gang against gang. Mirande (1987) attributes the values of gang youths to the effects of systemic suppression of the Mexican American people, while Horowitz (1983) tends to emphasize the protective role that gang members play for others in their kinship and friendship networks.

Many daily activities and habits of gang members are much like most normal adolescent and youth socializing, including talk about courting and local news, sports and recreation activities, and eating and drinking. But because their educational and job history is so poor, they are often unemployed and have time on their hands, time often spent drinking alcohol and taking drugs. During these times, aggressive and violent thoughts often rage to the surface, and an attack or retaliation against an enemy barrio may be planned and initiated. Acting *loco* (crazy) in this fashion takes on a special importance because the violent acts are carried out to avenge the deaths of gang associates lost in previous battles. Younger gang members are expected to learn how to do *loco* acts, if not become *loco* actors.

Subcultural signs. Gang signs and symbols also reflect the subculture. Ways of dressing, talking, and walking, as well as overall demeanor, are patterned. Younger gang members attempt to dress even more "baggy" (loose, khaki pants) and act more "cool" than the older members. A nickname is affixed to a new member and in the future, he will apply this name (along with the barrio gang name) in graffiti on walls, as well as tattoo it on his arm or other part of his body. Dancing, car culture (adornment and cruising), and music styles reflect the syncretic style of the cholo—a little of this and a little of that.

What Can We Learn?

The barrios that spawned these gangs are still around, as are the poverty, stressed families, and the conflicts of schooling and cultural identity. Immigration from Mexico and, increasingly, other Latin American nations continues. The children of these new immigrant families are pulled into the cholo life of the streets even faster than previous generations. As in earlier decades, crowded housing and troubled familial conditions continue to push children out to the only space available—the streets. Without more effective intervention by social welfare and social control agencies—especially in the areas of family support, schools, and policing—the Mexican American gang problem will worsen. At present, suppression strategies appear to dominate the way we deal with gangs. A balanced approach is required—i.e., carrots as well as sticks. Parental training and counseling, early remediation and support in school, and a community-focused law enforcement relationship would help alleviate the worst effects of the gang problem (Morales, 1982; Vigil, 1993).

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